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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001808

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [MOPS](#) [KS](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: NO TRACTION FOR ANTI-PRT DEMOS DURING POTUS VISIT

Classified By: POL James R. Heller. Reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), one of the largest leftist NGOs in Korea, announced on November 2 plans for demonstrations -- coinciding with President Obama's November 18-19 visit to Seoul -- against the ROK's decision to lead a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Afghanistan. The demonstrations, however, are unlikely to materialize due to a lack of interest among the public, according to one PSPD member. Moreover, the Korean National Police (KNP) are determined to prevent even small demonstrations during President Obama's visit, much less a replay of the 2008 anti-government demonstrations that mobilized mass opposition to President Lee Myung-bak. As public support for dispatching Korean troops to provide protection for the ROK-led PRT appears to be gaining, the opposition Democratic Party (DP) has not decided whether for political reasons it will oppose the government's plan. End Summary.

Comment

¶2. (C) Calls for demonstrations against the government's plan to send a PRT to Afghanistan grab the headlines, but there is also a broad base of support for Korea to participate in the reconstruction effort. Much of the support stems from a sense that the ROK should honor the U.S. request for assistance in Afghanistan. A growing number of people, however, believe that Korea has an obligation to play a more active role in the international community commensurate with its economic muscle and global ambition. End comment.

Call for Demonstrations...

¶3. (SBU) PSPD announced on November 2 plans to organize candlelight demonstrations against the "ROK-U.S. War Alliance" and the ROK's plan to send troops to Afghanistan to provide protection for a proposed ROK-led PRT. The demonstrations, evoking memories of the massive anti-government candlelight demonstrations in 2008 that nearly crippled the Lee administration, were to coincide with President Obama's November 18-19 visit to Seoul.

¶4. (SBU) PSPD is a leftist NGO and one of the largest in Korea with 10,000 members, 50 paid staff, and 50 volunteer staff. PSPD established a "Convention of NGOs Opposed to Re-Sending Troops to Afghanistan" that included a who's who of left-of-center Korean NGOs. The coalition closely resembles the players that led the massive 2008 anti-government candlelight demonstrations that mobilized mass opposition to President Lee over his decision to resume

imports of U.S. beef.

...Falling on Deaf Ears

15. (C) Han Gui-young, a PSPD member and General Manager of Korea Society Opinion Institute (KSOI), told us November 9 that KSOI had done a poll the week of November 2 showing 51 percent support for "deploying troops" to Afghanistan and 40 percent opposed. Han said that opposition to sending troops had fallen significantly from a poll KSOI did several months ago that showed opposition at 70 percent.

16. (C) Efforts to organize demonstrations are failing to achieve critical mass for several reasons, according to Han:

-- The Korean public sees the war in Afghanistan as a "good war" compared to the more controversial Iraq War.

-- The public was conditioned to sending troops abroad when the ROK sent troops to Iraq, a decision made by the former left-of-center government.

-- The public is coming to understand that the troops accompanying the PRT are not combat troops.

-- The Democratic Party (DP) is busy with other domestic priorities and has not focused on stoking opposition to the administration's plans for Afghanistan.

-- The public is more interested in the Korean economy than protesting against the government.

-- President Lee's base supports the decision to send troops to Afghanistan.

Police on Alert

17. (C) A Korean National Police (KNP) source told us November 5 that the KNP would prevent any unauthorized demonstrations in Seoul; a replay of the 2008 anti-government candlelight demonstrations would not be permitted. The focus of attention, he said, was on the new Gwanghwamun plaza in the center of Seoul (and, coincidentally, in front of the U.S. Embassy) where opposition groups are calling for demonstrations during President Obama's November 18-19 visit.

The government's opponents, our source said, may want a repeat of the 2008 demos, "but their dreams will not come true."

DP Finger in the Wind

18. (C) The opposition Democratic Party (DP) is waiting for the government to submit to the National Assembly a formal proposal on its plans for assistance to Afghanistan before deciding whether the party would formally oppose the plan. One DP official told us November 9 that the party was gauging the public's mood and would be "cautious."
STEPHENS